
Remote Control

Television, Audiences, and Cultural Power

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Chapter twelve

“Don’t treat us like we’re so stupid and naïve”:

Toward an ethnography of soap opera viewers

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and Eva-Maria Warth

During the summer of 1986, the Tübingen Soap Opera Project team conducted twenty-six ethnographic interviews with viewers in western Oregon. The first part of this paper places our study within the context of recent ethnographic work on particular social audiences of popular texts and describes our research design. The second part gives a preliminary report of our analyses and is divided into three sections: 1) soap operas in the context of everyday life for women working in the home; 2) how viewers construct the soap opera as a text; and 3) a feminist approach to the issue of gender and genre. Finally, we take a discursive approach to the interviews conducted by Kreutzner, Warth, and Seiter in all-female groups in our postscript on gendered discourse.

The ethnography of reading

Our study of Oregon soap opera viewers is indebted to recent work in the “ethnography” of reading that has been done by David Morley and Janice Radway. In *The “Nationwide” Audience*, Morley proposes a model for the interaction of viewer and television text which challenges both the uses and gratifications model, with its unlimited possibilities for individual responses to the media, and the hypodermic needle theory of mass culture, with its ideological overdetermination.¹ In “A Critical Postscript” to *The “Nationwide” Audience*, published in 1981, Morley raises a number of issues pertinent to our own study.² Whereas the “Nationwide” study emphasized the influence of class as a parameter of cultural decodings, the postscript draws attention to the investigation of sex/gender as a crucial aspect in the production of meaning. As the work of Charlotte Brunson suggests, the social category of gender is essential to an understanding of the specific relationship between a generic form and gender-specific cultural competences of viewers.³ Morley’s critical reassessment of “Nationwide” also points to theoretical problems raised by fictional texts. The concept of “preferred reading,” which has been developed in the context of news and current affairs television, raises a number of problems when applied to fictional forms. The hierarchy of discourses in television’s fictional texts tends to

be more ambiguous, preventing narrative closure on all levels of the text, and thus rendering the text more open to divergent meanings.

Another point of departure from *Nationwide* lies in Morley's reformulation of the notion of decoding, which is no longer conceived of as a single act of reading, but also as "a set of processes – of attentiveness, recognition of relevance, of comprehension, and of interpretation and response."⁴ This conceptual shift is closely related to a stronger emphasis on respondents' actual interlocutions as primary "data" rather than, as in *Nationwide*, dealing only with the substance of the viewers' responses. Morley suggests that specific meaning constructions can only be accounted for by close attention to the linguistic form in which they are expressed. In conclusion, Morley proposes an "ethnography of reading" which would account for the cultural rules organizing individual diversities of a basically social phenomenon.⁵

Janice Radway's study of forty-two American women who are avid readers of romances, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*, starts from the premise that the popular appeal of a fictional text depends on the recognition of its genre attributes. Radway sets out to "represent schematically the geography of the genre as it is surveyed, articulated, and described by the women themselves."⁶ By relying on empirical work – questionnaire responses and intensive interviews – Radway avoids the pitfalls both of an older type of formula criticism developed within popular culture studies and of the theoretical assumption of the implied reader as used in models of reader-response criticism. The value of this approach lies in its capacity to account for the affinities and correspondences between a certain narrative style and the cultural competences of a particular group of readers.

Conceived of as an ethnography, Radway's book is not limited to the exploration of text and genre. Locating her findings within the theoretical frameworks furnished by feminist sociologist Nancy Chodorow and Marxist critic Fredric Jameson, she concludes that women who purchase and read romances use the act of reading to create their own space in the confining routines of their daily lives as wives and mothers. Thus, reading romances provides the women relief from the seemingly endless demands on them as nurturers. In more general terms, the reading of romances implies a gesture of protest against the strictures of their everyday lives within a patriarchal society. Radway's decision to shift the emphasis of inquiry from the text itself to the social event of reading, and to investigate this event through the application of ethnographic methods, were influential on the design of our own research project. Like David Morley's recent work on television in the familial context, *Family Television*, Radway offers the insight that in order to understand the meaning of popular culture, one has to ask what it is that people are doing when they read or watch, and how they themselves understand these activities.

In adapting Morley's and Radway's work to a study of the soap opera, our work focuses on a privileged object within television research. The genre's special status has a number of rather different sources. Thus the first empirical

broadcast media audience study, Herta Herzog's pioneer article "On Borrowed Experience," investigated soap opera listeners.⁷ Textual analyses have frequently centered on soap operas, which attract scholarly interest because of their comparatively long history, their proliferation, and the special problems posed by seriality and melodrama. Because they are broadcast daily, soap operas lend themselves to an investigation of television in the context of the everyday. Since the genre has been associated with an audience of women, it has attracted the attention of feminist critics. This body of work has attempted to theorize the construction of gender within the text and within the audience. Finally, prime-time serials such as *Dallas* and *Dynasty* have become symbols of US cultural imperialism, and the subject of study outside the United States. Within the context of the problematic of culture and ideology, empirical audience studies on US prime-time soap operas in other countries have attempted to come to terms with cross-cultural readings of these shows.

The Oregon audience study

All of the interviews took place in the Eugene/Springfield metropolitan area of western Oregon. The area is characterized by high unemployment (9.5 per cent during the summer of 1986), relatively low per capita income (\$7,302 per year), and a predominantly white population (blacks making up only 1,618 of a county population of 275,226; other minorities, mostly Chicanos (Hispanic-Americans), Asians, and Indians, make up about 3 per cent of the total population). The largest employer in Eugene is the University of Oregon; in Springfield it is the Weyerhaeuser lumber mill, where the workers were on strike during most of the interview period (a strike which ended with the workers giving up about \$4 an hour in wages and fringe benefits). Like the entire state of Oregon, Eugene/Springfield has suffered from serious economic depression since the 1970s, due to its reliance on the lumber industry (which suffered from a drastic fall in housing starts) and tourism (which suffered from the rise in gasoline prices).

Between July 21 and August 16, 1986, we conducted a total of twenty-six interviews. Each interview was carried out by two scholars of whom at least one was German. Fifteen all-women groups were visited by a female research team. All of our informants were white. Among the sixty-four participants were fifteen men. Eleven informants were unemployed at the time of the interview. The large number of unemployed men and women in our pool reflects our technique for contacting informants – to run an ad. in the Help Wanted section of the Eugene newspaper – and also reflects the economic depression which characterizes the region. Because of the tendency in this kind of academic research to deal predominantly with middle-class informants, and because of our interest in working-class readings of soap operas, we welcomed this composition of our informant pool. We judge our failure to contact any women or men of color for the interviews, however, as a serious limitation of the study.

The text of our ad. ran, under the bold print headline **SOAP OPERAS**, as follows: "We are writing a book and need to talk to people about soap operas. If you and your family/friends watch them, we would like to interview you as a group at your home (\$5/hour per person). Please contact us at. . ." The advertisement ran for three days; we were flooded with telephone calls. We asked the callers what programs they were interested in, where they lived, and how many friends or family members were available for an interview. Appointments were arranged with callers, giving preference to those who could promise large groups for the interview, to older respondents, and to callers who lived outside the university area.

The groups ranged in size from two to nine participants. The interviews took place at one informant's home and in the company of friends and family members she had chosen for the purpose of the interview. While some audience studies hire interviewers who are not involved later in the analysis of the transcripts and tapes, we remained within the boundaries of the ethnographic method in that all of the interviews were carried out by the four primary researchers on the project.

The informants impressed us as remarkably open and secure in the uncontested and undisparaged status of their knowledge about soap operas. The location of the interviews – the home of the informant who initially answered our advertisement in the newspaper – added to the sense of comfort. This also allowed us to gather more information about the informants by observing the domestic surroundings, which were carefully noted immediately after the interview. The ethnographic concern with speech was facilitated by the cultural difference between informants and interviewers (since at least one of the two interviewers was German). The definition of slang expressions, the identity of characters and actors, the description of the shows, and reviews of past plot events could be elicited from a believable (and often factual) non-initiate position that created less defensiveness from the informants, who were in a position, as members of the culture and authorities on US television, to speak to the 'foreigners' with competence and expertise.

In the first minutes of each interview we explained that US prime-time shows such as *Dallas* or *Dynasty*, but no daytime soap operas, are shown on German television, and that the goal for the German members of the team was to learn about soap operas while visiting the United States. The informants usually were not at all surprised to hear about the success of *Dallas* or *Dynasty* in West Germany, but frequently expressed some pity for German viewers deprived of daytime soap operas.⁸ Most of our informants assumed from our ad. that we were interested in talking about daytime programs, and hesitated to discuss prime-time serials until they were assured of our interest.

Questions of methodology

The author of the leading textbook on ethnographic methods defines ethnography as "the work of describing a culture."⁹ Ethnographers working within

anthropology emphasize "the native point of view" or the "ideational orientation," that is "the importance of understanding any given group's lifeways by discovering the learned systems of meaning by which it is structured."¹⁰

Television audience studies, even when they use ethnographic or qualitative methods, have not satisfied the requirements of ethnography proper, and our own study is no exception. While ethnographies are based on long-term and in-depth field work, most television audience studies have involved only brief periods of contact, in some cases less than one hour, with the informants. Also, while ethnographic methods have traditionally been used to study culture as a whole, television researchers study only one aspect of a culture when using this method and attempt to relate it to social identity.¹¹ Ethnographic audience studies share, however, ethnography's basic interest in an empirical investigation of cultural practices as lived experiences.

Recently, hermeneutic and discursive approaches to the study of culture have led to a fundamental critique of the epistemological, theoretical, and political assumptions implied in the concept of ethnography as "the work of describing a culture." As the title of James Clifford's seminal article indicates, "ethnographic authority" has increasingly come under scrutiny.¹² Of particular importance in our context is the critical challenge to traditional ethnography's implicit insistence on scholarly experience as an unproblematic source and ultimate guarantee of knowledge about a specific culture or cultural process. Today, there is an increasing tendency within ethnography to reject "colonial representations," i.e. "discourses that portray the cultural reality of other peoples without placing their own reality into jeopardy."¹³ Such a position does not only apply to ethnographic accounts of "other" cultures, but is also significant on an intracultural level. Audience studies are carried out by academics with specific social and cultural backgrounds, who "go out in the field" to learn about the uses and understandings of groups of viewers with social and (sub)cultural backgrounds usually different from their own. This means that the differences and similarities between participants and scholars in terms of class, gender, race, culture or subculture, educational background, age, etc. have to be reflected. These aspects will inevitably be at work in the exchange between interviewer and interviewee, and, as we shall try to show, they will shape the understandings and meanings produced in this situation.¹⁴

The following sections of our chapter present preliminary reports on our analyses of the interviews.¹⁵ In the first section, "Soap operas and everyday life," Eva-Maria Warth describes the way soap operas serve to organize time in the context of everyday life, especially housework. In the second section, "Text and genre," Hans Borchers discusses the various ways in which viewers define and describe the soap opera as text and as genre. Ellen Seiter and Gabriele Kreutzner, in "Resisting the place of the ideal mother," compare women's readings of the soap opera with the feminine subject position which critics see "inscribed" in the soap opera text.

Soap operas and everyday life (Eva-Maria Warth)

It was above all the work performed at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham and by Hermann Bausinger at the Department for Empirical Cultural Studies at the University of Tübingen which drew attention to the necessity of analysing media experience in its social context. According to this approach, the construction of the meaning of television and its programs is a social process that occurs within the everyday interactions of the home and the workplace. The question of how the media take part in structuring and organizing everyday life is inextricably related to the question of what meaning viewers give to a certain media product, in our case, the soap opera. What is important here, however, is the relationship between the levels of the general and the concrete: while soap operas certainly do belong to everyday life for those who watch them, individual routines differ remarkably according to class, gender, and age.

This section concentrates on the ways in which soap operas intersect with the everyday lives of women working in the home. While our study turned out to be rich in material on the interrelationship between the social condition of housewives and the soap opera discourse, this section focuses mainly on how our informants describe the ways in which media schedules influence and intersect with the temporal organization of their work. We will begin with a brief historical outline of the mass media's implications for the organization of time in the domestic sphere. The media's function in the context of the rationalization of housework will then serve as a backdrop for our informants' accounts of how their viewing is fitted in between the demands of housework and their need for leisure.

In his influential study "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism," E. P. Thompson proposes that temporal organization must be analysed historically in terms of its relation to the production process.¹⁶ His study shows that the revolution in the experience of time in the nineteenth century was not limited to the production process proper, but rather influenced all aspects of life. Training in time discipline was reinforced by rationalization efforts in the industry at the beginning of this century, which also produced changes in the time organization of the domestic sphere. The subjugation of the sphere of reproduction to time patterns similar to those of the production sphere resulted in a rigidity typical of the workplace.

These changes were of special importance for women, for whom the home primarily represents a place of work rather than a sphere of leisure, as it usually is for men. Despite the interdependency of the spheres of production and reproduction, housework is still surrounded by a discourse of naturalness, which renders it universal and timeless. In this context, housework is theorized as determined by natural time cycles, as a sphere of autonomy which resists industrial time economy.

It is the achievement of Gisela Bock and Barbara Duden to have countered such ideologies of naturalness by theorizing housework in economic and

historical terms.¹⁷ They show how Taylorism, which initiated the rationalization process in the US in the 1920s, grew to encompass the sphere of reproduction as well. This extension of rationalization to the home was seen as a prerequisite for workplace efficiency. According to the new principles of scientific management, housework appeared irrational and unstructured. The separation of planning and execution of daily work was seen as the most important requirement in the process of restructuring. Housework was no longer theorized as relying on the natural skills of women, but was conceived of as a "science" which needed to be studied. If on the one hand this implied an upgrading of housework, it simultaneously surrendered housework to a male discourse, which from then on was assigned final authority in questions of child rearing and household management. Radio, and especially daytime soap operas, which were designed for a specifically female audience in the 1930s, played a vital part in this process. Informative programs on household management as well as other women's programs such as the soap opera dealt, respectively, with practical and emotional problems encountered by women working in the home. In addition, the regularity of the broadcast supported the efforts toward efficiency and rationalization which were introduced via daily schedules, e.g. distinct time structures which were modelled in accordance with the production process. The schedules of radio and television were not arbitrary, but were designed in accordance with certain structures created by housework itself. The schedules thereby became synchronized and tied into a well-defined and "universal" schedule. Lesley Johnson describes this process:

In the promotion of radio as the constant companion to the housewife, programmers had adapted their timetables to the imagined patterns of a woman's life. Through this process radio stations set out to regulate the work and rhythms of daily life of all women to this pattern. So similarly did radio strive to control the domestic lives of all members of the community in the attempt to time-table their listening according to strict, reliable schedules.¹⁸

Although the hour or two of soap opera watching represents a fixed point in the daily schedule for most of our informants, there were significant differences in the way women reconciled this fixed pattern to their obligations and needs.

Soap opera viewing raises the problem of female pleasure and its place in women's lives. Housewives especially are not usually granted a right to relaxation, since housework is constructed as a potentially endless task. Nancy Chodorow has drawn attention to the "fundamental asymmetry in daily reproduction. Men are socially and psychologically reproduced by women, but women are reproduced (or not) largely by themselves."¹⁹ The problem of women's reproduction is aggravated by the fact, noted by Ann Gray, that "the domestic sphere is increasingly becoming defined as their only leisure space."²⁰ The lack of a clear spatial demarcation between work and leisure therefore makes it even more complicated for women to assign a comfortable space for themselves and to reconcile their own needs with the needs of others.

For women in the home, leisure activities such as watching television must be viewed as complementary to work. The practices of soap opera viewing and their evaluation may be seen as women's attempts to resolve contradictions inherent in domestic work. In this context, television reveals the constraints of housework as unpaid labor (which accounts for the absence of regulated leisure time).

In our study we observed significant differences in our informants' patterns of soap opera engagement and their evaluation of viewing as a habit. These differences seem to be closely connected to the way in which the organization of their work allows for or excludes the possibility of leisure time. These organizational patterns correspond closely to Ann Oakley's findings in her seminal study, *The Sociology of Housework*.²¹ Oakley differentiates between women who perform their household duties according to set standards and routines and those who do not. The work patterns of the first group show the effects of the industrialization of "domestic" time in the attempt to impose a sense of rationality, efficiency, and security on a potentially endless and typically frustrating activity. Those of our informants who fit this first category used soap operas as a fixed point in time around which daily tasks are organized: "I schedule all my activities in the morning so that I'm home in the afternoon to watch my shows." Household duties are planned and timed according to the television schedule: "I go out and fix casseroles for supper and throw them in the oven between two and three o'clock, you know, so I don't miss them [the soaps]."

In the context of this kind of household management, which is subjected to norms of efficiency and rational organization, soap operas may be more easily regarded as a reward, as a well-earned moment of leisure which is enjoyed without guilt:

SS What I try to do is get everything I want to do done before that time. Then I don't feel guilty if I sit down and watch them. . . . I like to get up in the morning and get done what I figure I should do and then that's my relaxing time. It's just to sit down for a few hours.

One woman in her fifties very self-confidently described the way she defends her soap opera pleasure against social obligations and the needs of others:

MD People know not to call me between 12.30 and 3.00 unless it's a dire emergency. If it's really something, they can call me at 1.30. Cause *Capitol* is on and I don't really watch it. . . . All of my friends know, do not call at that time. My husband . . . if he comes in he's very quiet and just goes right on out.

The pleasure of undistracted and concentrated viewing, which Charlotte Brunson has described as a mode of viewing associated with power (and thus with male viewing patterns) is made possible for these women by adapting their work to principles associated with the sphere of production and thus paid for by a submission to the norms of male discourse.

While most of our informants would consider undivided viewing the ideal mode of soap opera reception, the women who belong to the second group – those who do not adhere to a strict routine – experience this pleasure only as a rare luxury. One of these informants could afford a soap opera "treat" only during a time which for many women is associated with guilt-free indulgence: "I used to sit, especially when I was pregnant, to sit three hours and watch TV. . . . I can't do that any more." The women who do not tightly structure their housework, either because domestic circumstances do not allow it (e.g. the presence of small children in the household) or because it is not their style, must constantly struggle to reconcile their need for leisure with conflicting obligations: "I turn it on when I can, if I'm in the kitchen, I turn the TV on . . . I'm usually cooking dinner or making the kids' lunch or something."

If soap operas cannot be aligned with special household chores demanding little concentration, the soap opera text becomes reduced to what can be heard while working in different parts of the house: "I *listen* to them, honest to God, I never sit! The voices . . . I keep it punched [keep the volume up]." Viewing in this case becomes highly selective and is restricted to moments of high dramatic impact, as the following quote from another viewer suggests:

RG I'll clean, but I'll have the TV on so I can hear it . . . if you can hear what's going on . . . like, you know, if there is a good fight or something going on, I always run in here and turn off the water and then sit in here and watch what's going on.

The conflict between household demands and the pleasures of soap opera viewing is one aspect which may account for the ambivalent attitude some of these women have toward their habit of viewing. The underlying sense of guilt ("I realized that I'm not getting anything done") which accompanies viewing for women in the second group may have contributed to the different kinds of relationships they established with us as interviewers compared to the first group. Those women who presented themselves as untroubled by conflicts over housework tended to remain rather formal and distant in the interview situation and tended to address us mainly in terms of our roles as academics. In contrast to this attitude, the informants belonging to the second group often quickly transformed the interview into the scenario of an intimate confession. We were frequently treated as confidantes, with the expectation that we would be sympathetic to the pleasures of soap opera viewing and understanding of the troublesome consequences these pleasures were reported to have in terms of neglected household work.

These differences in viewing behavior suggest that the conditions under which soap operas are watched differ even for women in similar situations, i.e. those working in the home, and they have considerable influence over selectivity, attention, and involvement with soap opera programs.

Text and genre (Hans Borchers)

The decision to do an audience study pertaining to an entire genre of television programming distinguishes our approach from other soap opera audience studies which focus on a specific show or a single episode. Examples of this type of research are the studies of Ien Ang and of Elihu Katz and Tamar Liebes. Ang's *Watching "Dallas"* was inspired by the reception of the prime-time soap opera in Holland. Apart from her concentration on one show, Ang's approach differs methodologically from ours. Ang did not actually see and interview her informants, instead she used letters from viewers, written in response to an ad. in a women's magazine. The audience research done by Katz and Liebes focuses on a single episode.²² Their interview sessions were centered on the showing of this episode which the authors then encouraged their informants to discuss. The project's concern with specific decoding processes of different cultural groups necessitated the restriction to one episode in order to allow for comparison. Using only a "slice of the text" as the basis of their investigation does not, however, provide insights into the specific nature of the reception of a potentially endless serial program.

In contrast to the work of Katz and Liebes, our research emphasizes meaning negotiations and specific forms of interaction generated by soap operas as a genre *per se*; a restriction of the textual base would have been a serious limitation. Therefore we did not rely on reactions to one episode, but rather identified the text with the experience of soap operas as our viewers described it on the basis of their individual exposure to the genre (length of viewing period, regularity, choice of programs, etc.). This approach allowed for the determination of the text from the perspective of the viewer, who tends to discuss soap opera narratives in terms of plotlines, rather than in terms of individual episodes. The narrative material resulting from the interviews therefore provides insights into the way selections are made during the interaction with the genre in its entirety. While our approach is less often revelatory of the meanings attributed to smaller segments of text, it generates a great deal of information on how viewers perceive the soap opera generically.

It is in terms of such a comprehensive understanding of the soap opera text that our interview material bears on recent theoretical studies. One of the most significant points such studies have made is the identification of the soap opera text as a fictional narrative governed by certain aesthetic and generic rules. Robert C. Allen's book *Speaking of Soap Operas* is exemplary of this approach in that it develops a strong argument against the notion that soap operas are representations of real life. Allen emphasizes the form's textuality, its identity as a fictional and narrative construct, and hence its inherent similarity to literary and film genres. One major consequence of addressing the soap opera as an aesthetic construct is to take its full dimensions into account, to acknowledge it as a "huge

meta-text," a saga which, in some cases, has taken shape over the course of several decades.²³

No television critic can possibly claim to be in control of this kind of text – as opposed to the literary or film critic whose texts tend to be much more manageable. The soap opera viewer's position in relation to the text is similar to the critic's but not identical with it. Although the textual knowledge and genre competence of the habitual viewer are, generally speaking, of a higher order than those of the television scholar, her or his reading will remain at best an approximation of the total text. The point is that the nature of soap operas as "huge meta-texts" necessitates, be it in smaller or in larger measure, selectivity.

If the awareness of one's necessarily fragmentary actualization of the text is a groundrule for watching soap operas, the question arises: how do people cope with the soap opera text's gigantic dimensions and characteristic elusiveness? Our informants were aware of the impossibility for a single person to grasp fully the text of a soap opera. They freely admitted that, for one reason or another, their readings were incomplete; they even took this incompleteness for granted. A woman who no longer owns a television set told us: "Now, see, I don't even have a TV. I haven't watched for two months, three months, and I still know what's going on." Such a claim shows that the concept of text entertained by viewers differs to a remarkable degree from what the standards of a traditionally print-oriented culture tend to define as "the text." Because of the vicissitudes of their personal circumstances, working careers, and everyday lives, even the most loyal fans are perfectly aware that at best they only have a very sketchy notion of the text in its totality.

What we found in our interviews over and over again was that soap opera texts are the products not of individual and isolated readings but of collective constructions – collaborative readings, as it were, of small social groups such as families, friends, and neighbors, or people sharing an apartment. Most viewers report that they have made it a habit to rely on other people in order to compensate for gaps in their comprehension. One woman admitted she usually falls asleep during her soap opera hour. She can afford to because her daughter, who watches the show with her, will be there to tell her about the episode when she wakes up at the end of the hour: "I feel like all I've got to do if I want to know something is ask Shauna and she'll fill me in." Another woman reported that she called a friend in Los Angeles to tell her about the love-affair between Victor and Nicki in *The Young and the Restless*. Sometimes women watch the show together over the phone: "I'll call Christie, the other girl who watches it [*All My Children*] and we'll sit on the phone and watch it together and talk about everything as it's happening."

Since viewing a soap opera is an activity which often extends over many years, relying on another, more experienced viewer becomes standard practice for the neophyte. Those informants who talked about their earliest encounters with soap operas very often conceived of this process in terms of an initiation

they underwent under the supervision of a more knowledgeable viewer, usually their mothers. Here is a typical version of this initiation story:

LMO My mother is the one that got me hooked on soap operas. It was a long time ago. She used to watch them as a kid, when she was in college. And so a long time ago, when I was at home, helping to take care of my younger brother, and she'd be home sometime during the day, working, and she'd turn on the soap operas and so I'd ask her who these people were. And she can give me a whole run-down history twenty years ago.

If calling upon the familial and social networks for support in the formidable task of keeping track and making sense of their shows is one way of coping with the text, the strategy of a deliberately selective reading is another. Since our lack of familiarity with some of the shows quickly became obvious to our informants, they often volunteered to give plot summaries. What these summaries reveal is the soap opera viewer's ability to discriminate between subjectively attractive and unattractive storylines, and to concentrate on those segments of the text which they find personally most satisfying. A 34-year-old woman was very outspoken in describing her technique of separating, as she put it, the fillers from the meat:

LMA They introduce like maybe three plotlines, and then, usually there is one that thrills, you know, you're dying to find out what's going on, and the other two are fillers, and I'll skip through the conversation ones. I do that a lot on *Santa Barbara*. Like, "OK, come on, let's just . . ." you know. I'll skip to the meat, you know.

Many of our informants mentioned this habit of focusing on a particular storyline instead of attempting to keep abreast of the whole complicated plot structure of a soap opera. Some reported using video recorders for the express purpose of cutting out segments they classified as unexciting or meaningless. A 24-year-old college student told us that he regularly watched four soap operas and that in order to keep track of all the stories, he would borrow a tape from his next-door neighbor whenever he couldn't watch his shows in the afternoon:

MM So I can just go over at night if I want to time it. You can watch a whole show in a half an hour, easy. Oh yeah! Zap through all the commercials, zap through all the meaningless scenes where nothing happens or no dialogue.

Assembling a condensed version of the text requires, of course, a thorough and sophisticated knowledge of the genre. We found that our viewers not only possessed expert textual knowledge, they were also very much aware of the poetic and generic rules that govern soap opera programs. Often informants explained to us the basic elements of the genre as well as the precise manner in which these elements are introduced and orchestrated, as in the following account:

RG They'll have one group of people that's really suspenseful . . . like a murder that's going on and they're investigating it . . . or there's some juicy affair. . . . And they're always introducing people that have got a deep secret. And you want to find out what the hell the secret is. . . . They always introduce new characters, you know, like somebody new comes to town and somebody else is all upset about it and they go "but why?" and then all of a sudden that son comes along that's illegitimate, that so and so doesn't know about, and that kind of stuff.

Generally speaking, we found that viewers have a strong sense of the constructedness of soap operas, of the essential artificiality of their favorite program. Not only did viewers frequently talk about and criticize the people who make soap operas (especially writers), they also commented on the conventions that rule and structure the shows. Their genre competence comes in many disguises. It was apparent in the complaint that writers cancel and replace characters too facilely, in the sober assessment of the cycles soap opera plots go through in the course of a year relative to the ratings sweeps weeks, as well as in the often-reported practice of predicting future plot developments – what Charlotte Brunsdon has called, "the pleasure of hermeneutic speculation."²⁴

Another aspect of their generic competence was the informed and mostly negative opinion the majority of our interviewees expressed about prime-time soap operas. Since we encouraged them to talk about prime-time television, they offered a whole assortment of critiques of *Dallas*, *Dynasty*, *Knots Landing*, and other prime-time shows. With the exception of a few viewers who voiced their impatience with a certain dragging on of storylines on daytime soaps, the large majority expressed their preference for the daytime variety of the genre. Prime-time soap operas were judged as too glittery and expensive-looking; our informants complained that they don't deal with "the normalcy of people." Others resented the rich veneer of prime-time soaps, their "mega-buck characters," especially the actress Joan Collins ("She makes more in one day than I've made in my whole life"). For many, prime-time soap operas belong to a different category altogether. One viewer said he likes "the soaps better than *Dallas* and *Falcon Crest*"; another told us that "the soaps are more laid back, they're not made for nights," and a third viewer remarked that although she watches daytime and prime-time soaps, the prime-time variety is "not as hooky." Most of our viewers expressed their loyalty to the daytime soaps and tended to be very conscious of the differences between the original thing and the spin-off.

Alongside their generic expertise, their discrimination and critical distance, our informants also evinced the seemingly contradictory impulse to permit the fiction to spill over into their real lives and social worlds. Most of them told us they were bound to the characters on their show by feelings of intimacy. They sometimes referred to them as friends with whom they talked, laughed, cried, and

suffered. Here is a young woman who resented her boyfriend's lack of understanding when she cries over the characters on her show:

DL Yeah, and the old man comes home and he'll say: "God, why do you get so involved with it. It's just TV!" [Changes her voice] "Yeah, but you don't know them like I do, you know, they're like my friends." He don't understand.

Another woman, who lives with her ageing mother, took the trouble of typing out an account of the two "most memorable, moving scenes I've seen on soap operas," in response to our post-interview questionnaire. Her account amounts to a highly personal reaction to the deaths of two characters on *Days of Our Lives* and *Another World*.

The pleasure our viewers derive from their appreciation of the text's fictionality does not prevent them from getting personally involved in the text – and, by extension, from experiencing soap operas as texts which are relevant to social reality. Our interview with a group of four viewers provided an example of the coexistence of both attitudes toward the soap opera text. While one group member argued that a soap opera is "just a TV show," another claimed that "they do set moral standards" and that "there are people that really do believe those things." He continued to substantiate his point by establishing an analogy between Phoebe's disapproval of Tad and Hilary's affair on *All My Children* and his own great aunt's severe standards in sexual matters – standards from which he himself and his girlfriend had suffered.

It seems, then, that the soap opera text, not least because of the strong need it creates for collaborative readings, has considerable potential for reaching out into the real world of the viewers. It enables them to evaluate their own experiences as well as the norms and values they live by in terms of the relationship patterns and social blueprints the show presents. It is important to remember, however, that this is only one side of the text's appeal. Our women informants appreciated the notorious Erica Kane of *All My Children* because of the remarkable success she enjoys in her personal life and her career, and it became clear that they tend to see her as a model applicable to their own private situations and to the social roles they were themselves involved in. At the same time, they took great pleasure in the very unreality and fictional constructedness of the storylines Erica was often a part of. When a particularly outlandish turn in the plot required Erica to walk through the jungle for three days, they commented: "It's unreal that she would look like that after three days of not washing her hair and. . . . But they had her that way so . . . it was kind of funny! That's part of it, that it's fun to watch that!"

Our viewers' appreciation of both aspects of the Erica Kane character points to the divergent ways in which the soap opera text may elicit gratification. It also testifies to the ability of experienced viewers to commute with considerable ease between a referential and a purely fictional reading – even if these readings

appear to be mutually exclusive. The evidence our interview material contains leads us to conclude that, while the text has the potential of addressing its readers on a level of social engagement, its principal appeal is undoubtedly to their genre competence, sense of critical distance, and enjoyment of the sheer playfulness of fiction.

Resisting the place of the "ideal mother" (Ellen Seiter and Gabriele Kreutzner)

In her influential analysis of the daytime soap opera, Tania Modleski describes the woman's position as a reader inscribed in the text in these terms:

The subject/spectator of soap operas, it could be said, is constituted as a sort of ideal mother, a person who possesses greater wisdom than all her children, whose sympathy is large enough to encompass the conflicting claims of her family (she identifies with them all), and who has no demands or claims of her own (she identifies with no one character exclusively).²⁵

The soap opera villainess may make it difficult for viewers to assume this female position comfortably, for they may find that she acts out their own, largely hidden, desires for power although at the same time they feel they must condemn and despise her. The model Modleski uses is Freudian: "The extreme delight viewers apparently take in despising the villainess testifies to the enormous amount of energy involved in the spectator's repression and to her (albeit unconscious) resentment at being constituted as an egoless receptacle for the suffering of others."²⁶

Modleski offers no possibility for *conscious* resistance to the soap opera text: the spectator position is conceived of in terms of a perfectly "successful" gender socialization entirely in keeping with a middle-class (and white) feminine ideal. The desire to watch soap operas comes from a kind of repetition compulsion brought about by the conflict between the ideal mother position of feminine passivity and the villainess's expression of real but hidden fantasies of power. Robert C. Allen has suggested that this work poses a problem in that "although Modleski seems to present the mother/reader as a textually inscribed position to be taken up by whoever the actual reader happens to be, she comes close at times to conflating the two."²⁷

In our description of those Oregon interviews conducted within all-female groups, we would like to take Modleski's concept of the textual position offered by the soap operas as a starting point. While this position was partially taken up by some of our middle-class, college-educated informants, it was consciously resisted and vehemently rejected by most of the women we interviewed, especially by working-class women. The relationship between viewer and character more typically involved hostility – in the case of some of the presumably sympathetic characters – as well as fond admiration – for the supposedly despised villainesses.

Strongly held preferences for individual characters and dislikes for others prevented the ideal mother position as Modleski describes it from ever being fully taken up. Sympathy for characters was mentioned only rarely, while outrage, anger, criticism, or a refusal to accept a character's problems was frequently expressed. The women we interviewed showed a conscious, full-fledged refusal of the narrative's demand for sympathy and understanding. This refusal was fueled by the recognition of a gaping class difference between the comfortable professional lives of the television characters and the difficult financial situations in which many of our informants often find themselves. The fact that women characters on soap operas usually bear no visible responsibility for childcare and housework increased this resentment. It is not the villainess whom these working-class informants despise – it is the woman who suffers despite her middle-class privileges, a character type they call the “whiner,” or the “wimpy woman.”

The “whiner” came up repeatedly in our interviews with a group of six women, the mother MP, her three daughters, and their female room-mates, all of whom lived next door to each other in Springfield, worked at minimum-wage jobs (newspaper delivery, bartending) and helped operate M's home telephone answering service. What is most irritating and infuriating about the “whiner” is her passivity, her dependence on men, her failure to take care of herself. While reconstructing the storyline around the character of Rick Webber, one of *General Hospital's* doctors, his wife, television journalist Jeannie Webber, was discussed by the group:

- DI And now he married Jeannie and all she does is cry and whimper, that's all she does.
 MT I don't like her either!
 DI She don't do nothing! I mean she cries about her son, she cries about her job, she cries about her baby, she cries about everything.
 MT She cries when she makes love, I think.
 DI She cries all the time! She's a wimpy woman!
 Both They can take her off! She's a wimpy woman!

Among a group of middle-class women in their fifties who worked at home, we found another hostile rejection of a sympathetic character who herself acts like an ideal mother:

- MD Like Karen on *Knots Landing*, the neighbor that you'd like to choke. I mean she's a little busybody. She's always going around and telling everyone what to do and what they should do. And sympathizing.

This remark is especially interesting because Karen comes under attack specifically for her feminine qualities, such as sympathizing with others.

In a group consisting of a woman in her thirties, JS, and her mother-in-law, two foster-daughters, a cousin, and a friend and neighbor, the women discussed

their feelings for the villainesses on their favorite shows. All of the women commented on their preference of strong villainesses; the younger respondents expressed their pleasure in and admiration for the powerful female characters who were also discussed in terms of transgressing the boundaries of a traditional pattern of resistance for women within patriarchy. The pattern here of finishing each other's sentences was typical of many of our interviews with all-female groups:

- LD Yeah, they can be very vicious [Laughs] – the females can be very vicious . . .
 JS Seems like females have more of an impact than the males.
 SW . . . and they have such a . . .
 TM . . . conniving . . .
 SW . . . brain! Yeah! [Laughter]
 LD They're sneaky!!! Yeah!
 SW They use their brain more . . . [Laughter] instead of their body! They manipulate, you know!

Tania Modleski's work suggests that the only outlet for female aggression and anger on the soap opera is the character of the villainess. Drawing on psychoanalytic theory, Modleski argues that female aggression is repressed and is symbolically taken up, played out, and neutralized in the character of the villainess. Our respondents, however, expressed love and admiration for these powerful female transgressors. For them, one of the pleasures of soap opera viewing consists in targeting certain characters as objects of their own verbal aggressions. KK and JH, two college-educated women sharing a house and making their living from organizing adult education courses, put it this way:

- JH A lot of times we just get caught up in it, and [we go] “Oh you bitch” or something . . .
 KK Yeah, it's a good cathartic kind of thing, you know, because, we can just kind . . . one creep Waide comes on, you know, and we go: “Yeah, I hate you, this is stupid,” you know, so we get out a lot of stuff . . .

These women explained their own viewing in terms of their interest in eastern philosophy and psychotherapeutic work. The pleasure in working out aggressions, however, seemed to be extremely important for many of our viewers. In another interview, KH, a 35-year-old woman employed doing clerical work for a cottage-industry record business expressed her enjoyment in taking unrestricted aggression toward a male character:

- KH We should have Jodie here, she's fourteen years old, and she and I just get so excited talking about *One Life to Live* . . .
 DH Yeah, Jodie yells at them, I don't. [Turns to KH] You sit there and yell at them!

- KH Oh, I do! . . . Especially when that ugly guy was on *General Hospital*, and he played two parts . . .
- DH Oh, Grant!
- KH Grant and somebody . . . who was his own twin . . .
- DH She hated Grant!
- KH And I hated him! I hated him, the original one, and then when they came up with a twin, and I had to see him again, in another part, I just screamed at him: "Where's your forehead," you know, I just hated him!
- DH . . . and he was . . . he was in Eugene, and a friend of hers saw him and she wanted to run out and say: "Please, can I have your autograph, my friend hates you!" I love that! Isn't that great?

Aggression was not limited to the actors, but extended to the scriptwriters as well, for slowing down the storylines and underestimating the viewer's intelligence, as MT expressed it: "just don't drag them out and don't treat us like we're so stupid and naïve, you know! Like I said: I don't like to figure out stuff myself: keep me hanging, too."

Most women have an ambivalent relationship to the narratives: enjoying the suspense but conscious of being manipulated by the story, made to wait for plot developments. And while some women enjoyed successfully predicting plot developments, for MT (who works for minimum wage), scriptwriters have a job to do, one they get paid a lot of money for, and they should be better at it than she is, i.e. able to provide her with surprises. Like MT, a number of women felt they could write soap operas themselves, if given a chance.

In our interviews, female anger was far less repressed than the Freudian model of the feminine subject or Modleski's textual position allows for. In their interaction with the fictional world of the soap opera, women openly and enthusiastically admitted their delight in following soap operas as stories of female transgressions which destroy the ideological nucleus of the text – the sacredness of the family. In a follow-up interview with JS and SW, both expressed their partisanship for female transgressions of the holy law of marriage in cases where the (fictitious) situation seemed to become unbearable for the female character. Both said their husbands disapproved of this attitude:

- SW But there's lots of times where you want the person to dump the husband and go on with this . . .
- JS Oh, Bruce [her husband] gets so angry with me when I'm watching the show and they're married and I'm all for the affair. [Laughter] It's like, it's like [Voice changes to imitate Bruce]: "I don't like this, I don't know about you" [Laughter] . . . [and I say] "Dump him !!!"

Both women explained to us that they strongly favored the breakup of soap opera marriages in cases where the husband neglected the wife, and drew explicit connections to their own situations:

- SW He gets mad at me, but . . . it does justify the reason for her [if the husband neglects the wife], I'm all for it . . . think where you're saying: pay more attention!
- JS Right! See, this happens to you if you don't pay attention to me!

These quotations indicate a vast gap between the model of the passive feminine subject inscribed in the text and our women viewers who fail to assume the position of the all-understanding (and therefore powerless) spectators of textual construction. The "successful" production of the (abstract and "ideal") feminine subject is restricted and altered by the contradictions of women's own experiences. Class, among other factors, plays a major role in how our respondents make sense of the text. The experience of working-class women clearly conflicts in substantial ways with the soap opera's representation of a woman's problems, problems some women identified as upper or middle-class. This makes the limitless sympathy that Modleski's textual position demands impossible for them. The class discrepancy between textual representation and their personal experience constituted the primary criticism of the programs. Let's return to our conversation with MP and her daughters:

- MP The one thing I guess I don't really care about in the soaps is that . . . they're playing all the women as being career-oriented and, ah, making lots of money, they are not . . . they are not bringing other people . . . you know, not every woman is making a good income.
- DI Asa's wife doesn't. Asa's wife, she's not . . .
- MP Yeah, but she's not working, she's a staying-home wife. They need to bring in a few single mothers that are trying to . . .
- DI Make and take on five an hour.
- MP Yeah, right, trying to juggle the books and find a baby sitter . . .
- MT . . . deliver newspapers at one o'clock in the morning, working there until . . .
- MP They don't need too many of them, 'cause there is a lot of women that, you know, don't want that, they need escape to what it would be like when they're rich, but once in a while they should bring that in, 'cause . . . it shows: "Hey, this is what it's really like!"
- DI Say, wake up and . . .
- MT That's why you want them to escape, cause after three hours you turn them off and you might return to your three thirty-five job.
- MP Yeah, I know, but if that's all you see, then, it'll . . . you'll lose your interest.

One of the problems with the spectator position described by Modleski is that the "ideal mother" implies a specific social identity – that of a middle-class woman, most likely with a husband who earns a family wage. This textual position is not easily accessible to working-class women, who often formulate criticism of the soap opera on these grounds. But criticism is expressed only in terms of realism and escapism, as in the quote above, where a complaint about class norms

(having only career women or staying-home wives as characters) is answered by a validation of their function as escapism on these very same grounds (characters whose lives are different from those of the viewers). Any alternative version of the text is impossible for these women to imagine because it is so far beyond the horizon of reasonable expectation.

Postscript: a gendered discourse

Recent audience studies conducted by David Morley and Ann Gray in Great Britain have found women to speak "defensively and self-depreciatingly about their choices and preferences" with regard to television programs.²⁸ Charlotte Brunson argues that these studies confirm the "extremely contradictory position that female viewers seem to occupy in relation to their pleasures."²⁹ In comparison, our interviews show no such explicitly apologetic overtones. Moreover, they are considerably less informed by what Ien Ang calls "the ideology of mass culture."³⁰ This non-defensive position about television viewing was held most strongly in interviews conducted in groups where all the participants (informants and interviewers) were women – fifteen of the twenty-six interviews. In part, this suggests significant differences between the United States and Europe in what we might call the social construction of femininity.³¹ But it also indicates the importance of situating the decoding of television programs within the context of concrete social exchanges, among subjects whose histories determine the interaction and the kind of discourses which will be used.

To use Benveniste's definition of discourse, the meanings given to soap operas in our interviews depended on the "Is" and "Yous" engaged in a given communicative exchange.³² Although recent audience studies try to address the discursive "Yous" as historical subjects (rather than as scientific objects), they tend to exclude (as is the academic norm) any systematic account of the researcher's own subjectivity.³³ But discourse analysis focuses on the practices of all participants (including the interviewers) as social and historical beings. This is especially important when dealing with interviews, which unlike "natural" conversations, are, from the beginning, the researcher's creation. Because of the way we initially identified ourselves in the newspaper advertisement ("writing a book"), the discourse of the interviews was to some extent predetermined by our roles and status as: 1) employers, 2) foreigners, 3) academics, and 4) women. The interviewers' initial identification as academics and employers means that a social hierarchy is already at work in the interactions. In order adequately to understand the meanings of soap operas produced in our interviews, we have to recognize the asymmetrical, power-laden nature of the discourse in which they are produced and, more specifically, the significance of the researchers' subjectivities therein.

In retrospect, our communicative strategy was to de-emphasize our role as academics and employers. The position of relatively ignorant but interested

"non-initiates" into soap operas and of non-native speakers helped Kreutzner and Warth to counterbalance the initially asymmetrical discursive arrangement.³⁴ However, in analysing the interview tapes and transcripts, our status as women and our activation of specific patterns of gendered communication emerge as the most decisive factors for the developing interlocutions. These gendered patterns include both what we talked about – fashion, housework, heterosexual relationships, fantasy, sexism – and the way we talked. The interviews evidence what sociolinguists have found to be

recurring patterns which distinguish talk among women from that in mixed-sex and all-male groups: mutuality of "interaction work" (active listening, building on the utterances of others), collaboration rather than competition, flexible leadership rather than the strong dominance patterns found in all-male groups.³⁵

If our identification as academics, foreigners, and employers placed us in the category of "other," gender provided a position of "sameness" in relation to the informants.

In his reflections on ethnographic interviews, James Clifford points to the necessity of an intersubjective ground in any attempt to interact. According to Clifford, such a shared experiential world is "precisely what is missing or problematic for an ethnographer entering an 'alien culture.'"³⁶ But ethnographic audience studies significantly differ from classic ethnography's attempt to understand "other" cultures. Coming from western, late capitalist, and patriarchal societies, both interviewers and informants spontaneously relied on such a "common sphere," a shared experiential world according to which "sameness" in terms of gender provides specific possibilities to interact. That is, the intersubjective relations between the discursive "Is" and "Yous" were predominantly constructed according to the historical subjects' gendered identities. In retrospect, our motives for subordinating other social positions to the gendered one can be explained by three factors: 1) the existence of what a German ethnographer has called the researcher's *Angst* created by the transition from the relatively secure and well-known academic (sub)culture to the "unknown" field situation;³⁷ 2) our own (varying) gender-specific ambivalences concerning our positions as academics;³⁸ and 3) the fact that such a communicative repertoire is an integral part of female subjectivity practiced since we learned to talk. Indeed, these communicative patterns seem to be so "natural" and "transparent," so much a part of ourselves, that they go unnoticed in everyday activities, and we were scarcely conscious of using them in the interviews.

Our informants, on the other hand, were provided with few other social positions which they could take up discursively. As Susanne Sackstetter points out, ethnographic interviews in which researchers and informants are men can rely on a broad repertoire of possible discursive relations in terms of shared social positions.³⁹ Except for a gendered one, women have few social positions at their disposal which can be taken up communicatively.

The discursive formation of women talking to women in a domestic setting suggests the construction of a distinctly female space. Such a discursive space corresponds to the one in which most of our female informants reportedly engage with the soap opera text – a private, domestic space which is often characterized by the absence of men. In this social context, the focus is on the women: they are the protagonists, whereas men play supportive, if not subordinate parts. The metaphor of performance illustrates a particular “fit” between women’s understanding of their immediate social environment and of the soap opera texts (as both were expressed in the interviews). Here and there, female characters are of absolute priority. The male characters/subjects will add problems, pleasures, and “spice” (e.g. in terms of romance), but they are placed second – the emphasis is on the women who perform and perceive themselves as strong and active subjects. In critical retrospect, the context provided by feminist ethnographic work confirms that such understandings have to be contextualized: interpretations based on this kind of self-perception tend to be expressed only in discursive formations characterized by a collectively shared female identity and by the absence of men. It is significant that the ongoing discourse in the female group interviews was always at some point defined in terms of differing from an “other” one – usually identified as the male perspective on soap operas or in terms of the ideology of mass culture. Some women mentioned their male partner’s deprecatory attitude toward the genre, yet such deprecation was not represented as leading to conflict.

This suggests that the opportunity to produce meanings and pleasures by engaging with a discriminated popular text is “paid for” by women’s willingness to conceal these pleasures and meanings whenever the dominant discourse is spoken in a social situation. There, women tend to remain silent or describe their own meanings and pleasures from a position which discriminates against itself. If we perceive women’s social contexts in terms of a set of interrelating speech practices, the relationship between the gendered and the dominant discourse(s) on soap operas is a monological, unreciprocal one. Within the framework of social relations under patriarchy, women create a gendered, oppositional space to produce their own meanings and pleasures. The closing off of these meanings and pleasures can be seen as a strategy to avoid confrontation and conflict.

By relating differing discourses on soap operas produced in varying social contexts to each other, we can begin to trace the “working” of social power in the cultural production of meaning. Therefore, our future work will address the production of meanings (and pleasures) by historical subjects in at least two interrelating frameworks: 1) one which is constituted by the historical subjects’ social practices (in which other discourses on the text are prominent); and 2) one established by the textual determinacy executed by the television program or genre. Both interactions – between a historical subject and a television text and between a historical subject and her social environment – have to be understood as a site of social struggle fought out on the terrain of language and speech practices.

Notes

- 1 David Morley, *The “Nationwide” Audience: Structure and Decoding* (London: British Film Institute, 1980).
- 2 David Morley, “‘The Nationwide Audience’ – A Critical Postscript,” *Screen Education* 39 (1981): 3-15.
- 3 Charlotte Brunson, “Crossroads: Notes on Soap Opera,” *Screen* 22, no. 4 (1981): 32-7.
- 4 Morley, “A Critical Postscript,” p. 5.
- 5 In this context see also Morley’s *Family Television: Cultural Power and Domestic Leisure* (London: Comedia, 1986).
- 6 Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), p. 13.
- 7 Herta Herzog, “On Borrowed Experience. An Analysis of Listening to Daytime Sketches,” *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* 9, no. 1 (1941): 65-95.
- 8 While German viewers are familiar with US prime-time serials such as *Dallas*, *Dynasty*, and most recently *Flamingo Road*, *Knots Landing* and *Falcon Crest* which are broadcast by West Germany’s public broadcast stations ARD and ZDF, it was only with the advent of commercial television that German viewers became acquainted with daytime soap operas like *Guiding Light* and *Santa Barbara* in 1987. US daytime serials had already been adopted by commercial stations in other European countries such as Italy and France, and the expected opening of West German television to these programs was one of the motivations for the Tübingen Soap Opera Project to investigate the genre.
- 9 James P. Spradley, *The Ethnographic Interview* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1979), p. 2.
- 10 John L. Caughey, “The Ethnography of Everyday Life: Theories and Methods for American Culture Studies,” *American Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (1982): 226.
- 11 See David Morley, *The “Nationwide” Audience*; Elihu Katz and Tamar Liebes, “Once Upon a Time, in *Dallas*,” *Intermedia* 12, no. 3 (1984): 28-32; and James Lull, “How Families Select TV Programs; A Mass-Observational Study,” *Journal of Broadcasting* 26, no. 4 (1982): 801-11.
- 12 James Clifford, “On Ethnographic Authority,” *Representations* 1, no. 2 (1983): 128.
- 13 James Clifford, “On Ethnographic Authority,” p. 133.
- 14 See also James Clifford, “Introduction: Partial Truths,” in James Clifford and George E. Marcus (eds) *Writing Culture. The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley, Calif.: The University of California Press, 1986), pp. 1-26.
- 15 In-depth analyses will be presented in the forthcoming book: Hans Borchers, Gabriele Kreutzner, and Eva-Maria Warth, *Never-Ending Stories: American Soap Operas and the Cultural Production of Meaning. CROSSROADS: Studies in American Culture* (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier).
- 16 E. P. Thompson, “Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism,” *Past and Present* 38 (1967): 56-97.
- 17 Gisela Bock and Barbara Duden, “Arbeit aus Liebe – Liebe aus Arbeit. Zur Entstehung der Hausarbeit im Kapitalismus,” in their *Frauen und Wissenschaft. Beiträge zur Berliner Sommeruniversität der Frauen* (Berlin, 1977), pp. 118-99.
- 18 Lesley Johnson, “Radio and Everyday Life. The Early Years of Broadcasting in Australia, 1922-1945,” *Media, Culture and Society* 3, no. 2 (1981): 167-78.
- 19 Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1978), p. 36.

- 20 Ann Gray, "Behind Closed Doors: Video Recorders in the Home," in Helen Baehr and Gillian Dyer (eds) *Boxed In: Women and Television* (London: Pandora Press, 1986), p. 41.
- 21 Ann Oakley, *The Sociology of Housework* (London: Martin Robertson, 1974).
- 22 Elihu Katz and Tamar Liebes, "Once upon a Time in *Dallas*," *Intermedia* 12, no. 3 (May 1984): 28-32.
- 23 Robert C. Allen, *Speaking of Soap Operas* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1985).
- 24 Charlotte Brunsdon, "Writing about Soap Opera," in Len Masterman (ed.) *Television Mythologies: Stars, Shows, and Signs* (London: Comedia, 1986), p. 83.
- 25 Tania Modleski, *Loving With a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1982), p. 92.
- 26 *ibid.*, p. 94.
- 27 Allen, *Speaking of Soap Operas*, p. 94.
- 28 Charlotte Brunsdon's review of Morley and Gray's work in "Women Watching Television," *MedieKultur* 4 (1986): 105.
- 29 *ibid.*, p. 109.
- 30 Ang, *Watching "Dallas," Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination* (London and New York: Methuen, 1985), pp. 86-116.
- 31 The importance of this difference was called to our attention by Charlotte Brunsdon.
- 32 "Discourse, in Benveniste's classic discussion, is a mode of communication where the presence of the speaking subject and of the immediate situation of communication are intrinsic" (Clifford, "On Ethnographic Authority," p. 131).
- 33 See also Ien Ang's chapter in this volume, pp. 96-115.
- 34 Our roles as "students" of soap operas and, for Kreutzner and Warth, as non-native speakers operated on two levels: we could apply them as "strategic devices," e.g. to interrogate particular descriptions and concepts ("What is a 'hunk'?") and to motivate character descriptions or narration of plotlines. However, such a strategic use did not contradict our sincerity as communicative partners (which is essential to intersubjective exchange), since our familiarity with the soap texts was indeed a limited one.
- 35 Barrie Thorne, Cheri Kramarae, and Nancy Henley, "Language, Gender and Society: A Second Decade of Research," in Barrie Thorne, Cheri Kramarae, and Nancy Henley (eds) *Language, Gender and Society* (Rowley, Mass.: Newbury, 1983), p. 18.
- 36 Clifford, "On Ethnographic Authority," p. 128.
- 37 Rolf Lindner, "Die Angst des Forschers vor dem Feld," *Zeitschrift für Volkskunde* 77 (1981): 51-65.
- 38 In her theoretical reflections on ethnographic interviews on women's lives, Susanne Sackstetter points out that the psychological discomfort caused by the entrance into an "unknown field" must be experienced even more strongly by female scholars whose "space" within academia is much less established than that of men. Moreover, to "go out into the world" may produce conflicts with gendered social norms, both individually and socially. This is especially true in West Germany, where women's public positions are significantly less well established than in the United States. See Susanne Sackstetter, "'Wir sind doch alles Weiber.' Gespräche unter Frauen und weibliche Lebensbedingungen," in Utz Jeggle (ed.) *Feldforschung: Qualitative Methoden in der Kulturanalyse* (Tübingen: Tübinger Vereinigung für Volkskunde, 1984), pp. 159-76.

- 39 Sackstetter points to Utz Jeggle's account of an ethnographic interview which he calls "Honoratioren unter sich" ("The intimacy of people of rank"). Jeggle argues that in his interview the discursive relationship between ethnographer and informant was constructed via a shared social position as "men of rank" (the interviewer as a university professor and his male informant as a village celebrity); Utz Jeggle, "Geheimnisse der Feldforschung," in *Europäische Ethnologie: Theorie und Methodendiskussion aus ethnologischer und volkskundlicher Sicht* (Berlin: Veröffentlichung des Museums für Völkerkunde Berlin, Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, 1982).